

The Life of Robert Dodsley

from William Horner Groves' History of Mansfield (1894)

Robert Dodsley, a man of distinguished literary talents and great amiability of character, was born at Mansfield in 1703, and died on the 25th of September, 1764. The author of "The Annals of Nottinghamshire" says, though Dodsley's father " is said to have been a man of some education, and even master of the Grammar School of Mansfield, he brought up all his children to servile and laborious occupations. Robert was placed as an apprentice to a stocking-maker; but, disliking this monotonous employment, he absconded from his master, and made his way to London. What situation he first obtained does not appear to be satisfactorily known. It is ascertained, however, that at an early period of his settlement in London he was footman to Mr. Dartineaf, Paymaster of the Works, whose gastronomic propensities rendered him so famous in his day as even to attract the satire of Pope.

From the service of this voracious devourer of ham pies, Dodsley passed to act in the same capacity to Miss Lowther. That lady appears to have been gifted with a peculiarly amiable and condescending disposition, and, having learned that her footman was fond of reading, and was possessed of something of a literary turn, she kindly opened to him the free use of her library, and encouraged him to cultivate his talent for versification; herself reading and praising several of his pieces, besides showing them among her friends. These pieces having attracted considerable attention in the circle in which she moved, Dodsley became encouraged to publish a volume of fugitive pieces, his good and generous mistress exerting herself to procure for him a liberal and extensive list of subscribers. This collection the author modestly termed, 'The Muse in Livery.'

His next attempt was 'The Toy Shop,' a theatrical satire, written under the same circumstances in respect of patronage and means of publication as the last. This is a work of real genius, and displays a knowledge of human character and a power of stripping it of its guises, at once masterly, yet playfully, which was very extraordinary in such a person, and which earned for him the support and esteem of several persons of distinction; and, amongst the rest, that of the great poet and satirist of the day, Alexander Pope, to whom the manuscript had been shown previous to publication. Pope, in a letter to the author, dated February 5th, 1733, said: 'I was very willing to read your piece, and do freely tell you I like it, as far as my particular judgment goes. Whether it has action enough to please the stage I doubt, but the morality and satire ought to be relished by the reader. I will do more than you ask me; I will recommend it to Mr. Rich. If he can join it to any play with suitable representations, to make it an entertainment, I believe he will give you a benefit night; and I sincerely wish it may be turned any way to your advantage, or that I could show you my friendship in any way.' This act of kindness and liberality on the part of Alexander Pope to our then humble, but highly gifted, countryman we have great pleasure in recording, inasmuch as it affords a direct refutation of the charge made against Pope by some writers, that he received all approaches of youthful rivals with jealousy and contempt.

The return obtained by the author from these works was sufficient to enable him to quit his situation of servitude and fulfil his intention of establishing himself in business as a bookseller. His shop in Pall Mall was opened in 1735, and the conversational genius of its owner, added to the friendly attentions of Pope, soon filled it with illustrious visitors. Soon after being thus established, he published the well-known farce of 'The King and the Miller of Mansfield,' which was performed in 1737; and, being a piece of really great merit

of its class, full of racy wit and broad English humour, had, in consequence, a good and prosperous run. In 1738, Dodsley produced 'Sir John Cockle,' intended as a sequel to the previous piece; but for the continuation he did not receive the same amount of praise as for the first attempt. In 1791, he brought on the stage 'The Blind Beggar of Bethnall Green,' If not a real failure, this farce, like its predecessor, failed to secure the approbation of the public. Dodsley has surprised literary men by the earliness of his literary speculations, their success, and the respectability of the authors whose works he published.

From Dodsley's establishment issued the earliest complete work of 'Johnson's London,' purchased by the rising publisher on a conviction of its merits, after having been subjected to his notice through the instrumentality of Cave. It was disposed of by Johnson, then in great poverty, as the work of a friend 'under disadvantageous circumstances of fortune;' and Dodsley, thinking it a creditable thing to be concerned in, 'paid for it ten guineas.' In the year 1746, he was a shareholder in another periodical—'The Museum, or Literary and Historical Register;' and, in 1748, he published 'The Preceptor,' to which Johnson, Walpole, and Akenside were contributors.

If Dodsley was not the original projector of 'Johnson's English Dictionary,' he was at least the first publisher to listen to the plan, and paid much practical attention to its progress. Before the vast undertaking was completed, it was the fate of the publisher, like the learned author, to be deprived of a wife, 'on whom his heart was fixed, and to whom every wish and desire turned.' In 1750 he published, anonymously, the most famous, and very certainly the most valuable, of his writings, 'The Economy of Human Life.' The deep Oriental tinge of imagination and the lofty tone of feeling and morality which pervaded the work could not fail to attract the public eye. 'Those who speculated on the subject gave,' says the editor of 'The Lives of Eminent and Illustrious Englishmen,' from whose article on the life of Dodsley many of these observations are taken, 'the authorship of the "Economy of Human Life" to the Earl of Chesterfield. Chesterfield, who had a real feeling of friendship for Dodsley, knowing the value of the sanction of his name, did not for a considerable time contradict the report.' This celebrated work had many imitations, but they have all fallen miserably short of the original.

His next project was 'The World,' of which he chose the title and wrote one number (32). In 1758, he made the tour of Scotland with Mr. George Spence, one of his most early and intimate friends, and in the same year appeared his 'Melpemone; or, the reigns of Terror and Pity,' an ode; and the most striking, if not the best of his theatrical compositions — the tragedy of 'Cleone.' Within the same year, too, the 'Annual Register' made its appearance. Few literary speculations have proved so profitable as this important work, nor had the public any just cause to complain of their share of its advantages. From its commencement to the termination of its new series, which ended about 1828, it was eminently useful and eminently successful; its utility and varied excellence, being known to everyone who reads, require no explanation.

In 1760, Dodsley published another profitable work, 'Select Fables of Aesop and other Fabulists.' Soon after this period, he retired from the active part of his business on a considerable fortune, amassed through the most gratifying means by which a man can gather wealth—the independent exercise of his own talents and industry. During his latter days he suffered much from gout, of which disease he died whilst on a visit to his friend Spence, at Durham, on the 29th of September, 1764, in the sixty-first year of his age. He edited and published many works to which this brief sketch of his life has not afforded opportunity to make reference, but from most of which he derived both profit and fame."

The tombstone of Mr. Dodsley, in the Abbey Churchyard, Durham, bears the following inscription:—

"If you have any respect for uncommon Industry and Merit,
regard this place,
in which are deposited the remains of
MR. ROBERT DODSLEY:
who, as an author, raised himself
from one of his rank in life
and without a learned education:
and who, as a man, was scarce
exceeded by any in integrity of heart
and purity of conversation and manners.

He left this life for a better, Sept. 25, 1764,
in the 61st year of his age."